

Trump: it was my decision to fire 'showboat' Comey

Trump may back out of FBI visit amid outrage over 'disgraceful' Comey firing

Current and former agents critical of president, saying he should provide agency with resources to finish Russia inquiry instead of saying more 'hollow' words

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Donald Trump has reportedly backed away from a planned visit to FBI headquarters in Washington, amid continued anger from current and former agents over the president's abrupt firing of director James Comey.

"What are you going to say? 'I love you FBI'? And kiss babies and pose for pictures?" said Ron Hosko, a former FBI assistant director and currently the president of the Law Enforcement Legal Defense Fund, which provides support to officers who face criminal charges.

"I think he just slapped the FBI in the face. It was disgraceful, outrageous, disgusting. These [FBI agents] are people who have education, who have experience. They know what bullshit looks and feels like."

On Thursday, White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders indicated that Trump would visit FBI headquarters "in the next few days". Later in the day, White House officials told media sources he would not.

Instead of visiting the FBI to say more "hollow" words, Hosko said, the president should publicly ask the FBI what resources it needs to complete its investigation of possible links between Trump aides and Russia - and then rapidly deliver them.

"If the list says we need 10 prosecutors who are dedicated to this and we'd like to handpick them, OK, make it happen," he said.

On Friday morning, the president showed little sign of contrition, writing on Twitter: "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!"

Louis Caprino, who served as an agent for 29 years and now runs a public safety program at Vincennes University in Indiana, said he didn't think the president could now "say much of anything" to mend his relationship with the FBI.

"He's damned if he does, damned if he doesn't. Rather than words, his actions are either going to make him or break him as a supporter of the FBI.

"If he really wants to show support and shows he's behind the agency, he needs to come up with the right successor for James Comey. That's going to be a tough one for him."

Former agents said Comey's replacement should be independent, with a strong track record and broad bipartisan respect to earn a swift confirmation in the Senate - someone, in fact, very much like Comey himself.

Visiting the FBI after a week of outrage and backlash "would be for purely optics reasons and in the FBI we are steadfastly averse to optics", said James Gagliano, a former chief of staff at the FBI's New York City field office.

Before the president fired Comey and the White House embarked on a week of contradictory statements about why he was fired and who was responsible, Trump had "done a great job of supporting law enforcement", Hosko said.

Many law enforcement officials fall on the conservative side of the political spectrum, and Trump had eagerly pledged to support law enforcement after years of protests of police killings of black Americans and police reform under the Obama administration. Before the election, current FBI agents described an intensely anti-Hillary Clinton atmosphere within their agency.

"The FBI is Trumpland," said one current agent said at the time.

What angered FBI agents the most this week, former agents said, was not the fact that Comey had been fired but the humiliating and public way it was carried out, followed by the insults heaped upon Comey by the White House, including a comment by spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders that Comey had committed "atrocities".

The White House claimed earlier this week that Comey's firing was in line with the opinion of rank and file agents within the FBI, who had lost faith in their director. The FBI's acting director, Andrew McCabe, flatly denied this claim in Senate testimony on Thursday.

"That is not accurate," he said. Comey "enjoyed broad support in the FBI and he still does to this day ... The vast majority of FBI staff enjoyed a deep and positive connection to Director Comey."

"It's almost like the more you talk about it, the worse it gets," Gagliano said. White House press officials, he said, said "the agents wanted a change and the rank and file were unhappy. That's just not true."

Within the FBI, opinions about whether Comey handled the Hillary Clinton email investigation correctly were deeply polarized, former agents said. But the way Comey was abruptly terminated – especially the fact that he found out about his firing from televisions in a room where he was giving a speech – sparked uniform outrage.

Caprino said he knew there were current and former agents who were glad Comey was gone, and who may have agreed with Trump that the former director was “a bit of a showboat” who “offered his opinion too often when his opinion was not required”.

But despite his own skepticism of Comey, the way the director was fired left him “very angry”, Caprino said, adding: “That man had a long career of faithful and absolutely honorable government service.” Comey’s treatment by the White House, he said, was “un-honorable”.

Should Trump eventually visit FBI headquarters, just minutes from the White House, agents and staff would greet the president with respect, former agents said. There was no chance they would turn their backs, Gagliano said, as New York police officers did to the city’s mayor in 2015 after two officers were murdered.

But while FBI agents might be polite, the welcome right now would likely not be warm, Hosko said.

“I think it would be hollow at this point” for Trump to visit, he said. Instead, the White House needs to “restore some trust by picking the right person [as the new director] and admitting this was bungled – and it was bungled, embarrassingly so”.

The White House did not respond to requests for comment.

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